



Water-quality and other environmental professionals deal with environmental regulations virtually every day, but the vast majority of people who are touched by these regulations often do not even know about them, much less understand how their lives are impacted by them. This month's guest columnist, Dr. Phil Kane, explains the importance of environmental regulation education. Creating a holistic education atmosphere and targeting audience segments is presented in this thought provoking-column by Dr. Kane.



By Dr. Phil Kane

PE Tip Sheet No. 34

Public Education and Environmental Regulation

Public education is an integral part of environmental regulation. Public education can be defined as all communication and learning experiences aimed at increasing knowledge, understanding, perspective, and ultimately wisdom concerning a topic of interest and value to people.

For environmental regulation purposes, the targeted population for public education consists of the regulated community. Private citizens, businesses, governmental agencies, charitable organizations, industry, and just about anyone else who conducts public and private activities potentially could be subject to environmental regulation, which explains the need for public education.

Based on the definition of public education as it relates to environmental regulation and its target population, a brief examination of environmental regulation is in order. Governments at all levels—federal, state, and local—possess the authority to create environmental regulations. At each of these levels, environmental regulations are created to ensure protection, conservation, preservation, and enhancement of the environment.

Wise use, control, and management of environmental resources are necessary to ensure environmental quality for future generations, so governmental entities create environmental regulations, adopting an adaptive—and sometimes even reactive—holistic approach. As a result, public education has to remain adaptive as well.

Regulated communities are responsible for being aware of all environmental regulations that apply to their activities, but it is not imperative, nor even desired, that everyone receive training on every environmental regulation. Some regulations are cosmopolitan, while the vast majority address a specific sub-

population of individuals conducting regulated activities.

It is the task of public environmental regulation educators to determine their target education audience. The importance of educators' knowing this audience can not be overstated. What works for one target audience will not necessarily work on another, and in fact, may have a detrimental effect. Remember that the target audience controls the education methods employed.

If a public educator is explaining regulations to professional engineers, a technical approach may be the most effective. On the other hand, a technical approach will not be as effective—and in fact, may even be detrimental—when dealing with a different target audience, such as people in the restaurant business, for example. This group would be better served with a less technical approach using lay terms.

The same environmental regulations may or may not apply to both the engineers and the restaurant audience, but the same education methods would not apply automatically to both groups. Knowing what the audience needs to know about environmental regulations is an important aspect of effective public education. Another key point is communicating in a way that the target audience decides is effective. Education methods must facilitate learning, not restrict it.

It should be stressed that environmental agencies recognize public education's importance and strive to educate their regulated communities effectively. Government entities often include a specific environmental education or training department. All environmental agencies embrace the basic premise that the regulated community needs to understand and comply with the environmental regulations.

In summary, the prime responsibility of the regulated community is for all entities, whether a business, governmental agency, private individual, or whomever, to know and understand all environmental regulations that pertain to their regulated activities. The perspective of the target audience is not to be forgotten, and the target audience has a responsibility to become actively involved in its own education. The statement "ignorance of the law is no excuse" is an extremely appropriate one.

Involvement of the regulated entities includes not only education and compliance with environmental regulations, but a sense of stewardship that encourages a true "cradle to grave" responsibility in all environmental activities. Involvement begins with taking advantage of any available public education and may expand to include anything from active participation in rulemaking, facilitating education, and volunteering, to enforcing environmental regulations. A holistic involvement in public education is imperative from all regulated entities.

The impact of increasing human population on the environment will ensure that public education in the field of environmental regulation will increase in importance. Everyone in the regulated community will have to be involved; a healthy environment depends on it.

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